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# Organizing for Prosocial Good: Making Sense of Models for Social Impact

## **Abstract**

The cohort of mission-driven organizations – institutions infused with social value – has grown from tens to tens of thousands. As more socially responsible organizations emerge, emphasis is increasingly placed on evaluating their impact. This study will instead shift the discussion from evaluation to organizing for prosocial good, answering the questions: how are organizations structured to create social good, and how can the odds of social impact be improved? My aim is to expand the current state of organizational scholarship surrounding social initiative implementation on an organizational level. To assist quantitative researchers in their assessment of social impact efforts, I built a qualitative typology revealing how social impact is modeled implicitly into the internal missions of organizations and their theories of how they can change the world. I then carried out two investigations to focus my research questions. First, I conducted a literature review to gain insights into the field and related disciplines. Next, I created a qualitative interview guide and conducted interviews with nineteen practitioners in the field representing a mixed sample of diverse profit structures and a variety of industries. Data analysis from these investigations yields an informed discussion on impact evaluation. Similarly, I created two broad categories – internal and external scaling – that explain how organizations are structured to create social good. Organizations using internal scaling to drive impact are likely to engage in organization-specific mission framing, asset priming, and internalization of stakeholder-centered decision making processes. Organizations using external scaling to drive impact are likely to act as movement leaders, leverage partners as impact vehicles, and allow partners to leverage their resources as well. By discussing evaluation, internal scaling, and external scaling in mission-driven organizations, I aim to reduce ambiguity on how organizations create social value and advocate for social mission management.

## **Keywords**

social change, organizational design, qualitative, typology, social impact

## **Disciplines**

Business

# Organizing for Prosocial Good: Making Sense of Models for Social Impact

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Wharton Social Impact Research Experience

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## I. Abstract

The cohort of mission-driven organizations – institutions infused with social value – has grown from tens to tens of thousands. As more socially responsible organizations emerge, emphasis is increasingly placed on evaluating their impact. This study will instead shift the discussion from evaluation to organizing for prosocial good, answering the questions: *how are organizations structured to create social good*, and *how can the odds of social impact be improved*? My aim is to expand the current state of organizational scholarship surrounding social initiative implementation on an organizational level. To assist quantitative researchers in their assessment of social impact efforts, I built a qualitative typology revealing how social impact is modeled implicitly into the internal missions of organizations and their theories of how they can change the world. I then carried out two investigations to focus my research questions. First, I conducted a literature review to gain insights into the field and related disciplines. Next, I created a qualitative interview guide and conducted interviews with nineteen practitioners in the field representing a mixed sample of diverse profit structures and a variety of industries. Data analysis from these investigations yields an informed discussion on impact evaluation. Similarly, I created two broad categories – internal and external scaling – that explain how organizations are structured to create social good. Organizations using internal scaling to drive impact are likely to engage in organization-specific mission framing, asset priming, and internalization of stakeholder-centered decision making processes. Organizations using external scaling to drive impact are likely to act as movement leaders, leverage partners as impact vehicles, and allow partners to leverage their resources as well. By discussing evaluation, internal scaling, and external scaling in mission-driven organizations, I aim to reduce ambiguity on how organizations create social value and advocate for social mission management.

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## **II. Introduction**

Social impact used to be for non-profits and government organizations. However, as business increasingly came under fire for causing and perpetuating social problems (Porter & Kramer 2011), investors and business leaders pressured firms to become more responsive to social problems and to behave more responsibly (Margolis, Daniel, & Walsh 2001; Mohr, Webb, & Harris 2001). Today, only a few major companies with extensive supply chains deny responsibility for social performance within those chains (Blowfield 2007), signaling a “mantra of accountability” (Ebrahim, Alnoor & Rangan 2010). Many for-profit firms take corporate social responsibility a step further, baking philanthropy and/or social entrepreneurship into their strategies in a myriad of ways. As for-profit companies engage in social impact and reconceive the intersection between society and business performance (Porter & Kramer 2011), hybrid entities emerge, combining elements of a for-profit focus on using the market to achieve results (Alter 2007, Light 2006) with a non-profit focus on social value creation and the double-bottom-line (Dees 1998, Austin, Stevenson & Skillern 2006). The emergence and subsequent propagation of business as a source for social good created a spectrum between traditional non-profits and for-profits in the ways organizations engage in social impact (Alter 2007).

While organizations such as Ben and Jerry’s, Patagonia, and the Body Shop have worked to improve the social consequences of their activities, select others remain simply unproductive, uncoordinated, or bent on using prosocial behaviors as PR ploys (Kuhlman; Newell & Frynas 2007). While these businesses are aware of the increased risks associated with not doing ‘good,’ they are much less clear about how to diminish these risks entirely.

Although there is a logical case to be made for identifying the different methods of impact in which organizations engage, the literature has yet to organize the diverse approaches and strategies related to social impact into a common conceptual framework. Researchers first contributed to narrow and specialized foci, building the knowledge base around corporate social initiatives and their positive and negative consequences, the relationship between corporate social and financial performance (Blowfield 2007; Margolis, Daniel & Walsh 2002; Schuler & Cording 2006), theories of non-profit institutions and their behaviors (Hansmann 1987), and strategies used by for-profit organizations with social missions (Alter 2007). The recent manifestation in non-profit, philanthropy, and social enterprise discourse is accompanied by little evidence on how social agents can improve the odds of impact (Light 2006) and what new tools, strategies, and methodologies are required to harness the positive contribution of business towards prosocial good (Newell & Frynas 2007).

### **Motivation**

Porter and Kramer’s shared value concept, which involves creating economic value in conjunction with social value (2011), made a business case for social improvement at a time when the social contract between people and companies was wounded (Barlerin) and CSR was a loose add-on for many companies (Kuhlman). Today, consumers and the media are pressuring organizations to be more transparent and to think about social impact in authentic and strategic ways (Kuhlman); however, tools to put shared value to use are still in their infancy (Porter & Kramer 2012). As Grant and Sumanth note, mission-driven organizations are becoming increasingly common as concerns about human welfare and CSR continue to rise (2009). Employees, more than ever, also want to do good (ibid.), and rank the value of helping others through their work as strongly as earning high income (Ernst & Valvanne 2012). Meanwhile, for-profit senior management, CSR, and marketers remain divided – some grasping the meaning of

the word social and seeing its links with daily business activity (Barlerin), and others not (Maignan et al. 2005).

Both camps want to demonstrate ‘impact,’ the results of their efforts to address social problems (Ebrahim & Rangan 2010). Few disagree that evaluation is important. It is difficult, however, to create and understand social benefits because society is a “level of analysis that is more inclusive, more ambiguous, and further up the ladder of abstraction than the corporation itself” (Clarkson 1995). For example, how is it possible to compare the benefits of a program serving *homeless pets* to a program serving *homeless vets* (Levinson)? Additionally, young or bootstrapping organizations find it difficult to decide on the right mix of investing in evaluation and/or using cash flow to expand operations (Matocha; Ruben; Tatz).

Thusly, my motivation supporting this study was initially two-fold:

- (1) to help develop tools to put shared value research to use*
- (2) to understand social impact by the decisions and processes guiding it, not just by the end results, and to hold a well-rounded discussion that incorporates evaluation but understands its shortcomings*

As the study gained traction and data collection was underway, I increasingly realized the significance of my research and its potential to tackle unanswered questions held by practitioners at participating organizations. Blue State Coffee (BSC), for example, grew from a small and early socially responsible business to a chain with seven stores and over 100 employees. Now that competitors have adopted BSC’s language and some of its practices, it’s founder Drew Ruben asks, “What makes us special now?” Strained yogurt manufacturer Chobani promised to give back to the community when it launched in 2007, and has since reached new levels of business success in a short period of time. Today, its vice president of philanthropy Sujean Lee picks up a blank slate and starts an entrepreneurial venture hoping to answer, “what can our management team do to stay true to our initial promise?” On the opposite side of the spectrum, established CSR and sustainability leader Intel looks to maintain top ratings and to move away from a formerly product-centered strategy. “How does impact translate to strategy?” asked its former CSR Strategy & Communication Director Suzanne Fallerder.

As the challenges and needs of organizations participating in the study became clear, I added a third motivation:

- (3) to fulfill an obligation to bring a balanced discussion of social impact to study participants by asking informed questions*

## IV. Methodology

### *Explorative Study*

The creation of this typology was best served by an explorative qualitative study using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). An explorative study is a suitable way to characterize phenomena in new lines of research that have not yet been described in much theoretical detail (Neuman 1994). Qualitative data provide a good source of well-grounded information rich in descriptions and explanations that would allow for the integration of initial impressions into a conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman 1994).

### *Qualitative Data Collection & Sampling*

I collected data by conducting nineteen interviews with leaders and senior members of organizations with social missions (Appendix A). First, I used Alter's hybrid spectrum to create broad sampling categories; nonprofits, social enterprise, socially responsible business, and corporations practicing CSR. Traditional corporations (not practicing CSR) were omitted on the basis that they would not contribute to my understanding of organizing for prosocial good. Next, I set a target of twenty interviews at twenty organizations to create a balanced number across the remaining categories and to provide room for variety within them. I attained variety by sampling from a wide range of industries, including apparel, chemicals, education, financial services, food & beverage, healthcare, housing, manufacturing, media, microfinance, mobility, technology, and venture capital. Within these industries, I selected organizations that were both representative of leading practices in their respective fields and accessible/willing to participate in the study. I aimed to include organizations of different sizes and avoided concentrating on specific geographies. By not selecting competing companies to participate in the study, I minimized potential conflicts of interest. After selecting organizations for the study, I aimed to speak with individuals who directed or oversaw social impact initiatives. However, due to differences in accessibility, scheduling, and organization structure, I concluded the study with a sample that has slight variations in position and tenure of the interview subjects. Issues that may have arisen from this sampling method will be discussed in the **Conclusions and Future Research** section.

The majority of the qualitative data was collected over a three-month period. I gave preference to on-site interviews because they enhanced the cross-sectional picture of the organizations, providing me with an appropriate theoretical "slice" of data and depth of theoretical sampling for the study (Glaser & Strauss 1967). When on-site interviews were untimely or impractical, I replaced them with phone or video calls of similar length. Whenever possible, I supplemented interviews with short discussions, document collection, and site observation at subject organizations.

### *Interview Guide*

To ensure consistency, I conducted all interviews using an informal interview guide to shape the course of discussion. The guide (Appendix B) consisted of roughly 10-12 questions divided into three sections with a debrief at the end to allow participants to more deeply explore certain insights or bring up new questions of topics. Wharton Professor Adam Grant, FSG Associate Daron Sharps, and Head of Impact Investing at the World Economic Forum Abigail Noble advised the process of question selection for the interview guide. Certain questions were modeled after prompts used in RSF Social Finance's portfolio audit administered by Lending Associate Reed Mayfield. While the majority of questions remained the same for all organizations,

additional or different prompts were at times used to inquire about specific projects or initiatives. Most conversations remained between 30-40 minutes to be respectful of study participant schedules, though some extended as far as 75 minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

After I completed interviews, I used grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss 1967) to analyze the data and enable the construction of common themes from the research insights. Grounded theory methodology provides a systematic method of analysis, which has the advantage of reserving the need for the researcher to conceive preliminary hypotheses. Collection and data analysis are conducted together to explore the research area and allow issues to emerge – especially when topics of a social nature are studied. My data analysis closely resembled the Straussian school of grounded theory, a structured and forced emergence of theory (Stern 1994).

First, I conducted full transcriptions of interview recordings. This process deepened my familiarity with the content of the interviews and formed part of my analysis, as the process of transcription illuminated new questions and issues. I chose to transcribe recordings directly after each interview, a step that allowed me to improve questioning and remove items from the interview guide that were confusing or extraneous. Similarly, my data collection methods improved because I noticed trends among the interviewers. For example, some participants responded better when given more time to answer, some gained enthusiasm when I reframed questions, and others elucidated claims when I moved onto a new topic. Because of the tedious process of transcription, I discovered what interview strategies evoked the most insightful data points from the subjects.

Next, I used open coding to identify, name, categorize, and describe phenomena. Transcripts and site observation notes were initially coded and divided into discreet threads of data. Through a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss 1967), I accrued data to form themes, sub-categories, and core categories. As categories started to accumulate and gain depth, I used memos to record my reflections and annotations of the data. Axial and hierarchical coding were also used when examining saturated categories and when developing conceptual relationships within them. This process of joint coding and analysis allowed me to generate a theory that is integrated, consistent, and close to the data.

After I sorted core categories, I cross-referenced them with organizational theory on social impact, mission planning, and evaluation, and then integrated explanatory theory during selective coding. As I compared more incidents the theory solidified and fewer changes were made. I continued until reaching theoretical saturation – when no new concepts emerged. Then, I delimited the theory by integrating details of properties into interrelated categories, taking out irrelevant properties of the categories, and reducing the number of categories. After coding, interpreting, and organizing the data, I emerged with two conceptual categories – internal and external scaling – and a refined perspective on evaluative questioning and measurement.



## **V. Results and Discussion**

### **A. Evaluation**

During the qualitative interviews conducted as a part of this study, almost all participants mentioned impact evaluation as either part of their organization's current strategy or as an item still under development. I begin my discussion of the data here for two reasons. First, the participants championed the importance of not drawing conclusions in a vacuum, that is to say, deciding if initiatives did or did not work anecdotally (Gershon). Second, evaluation was seen as a method to create alignment where there is a lack of consensus to impact, goals, and measurement (Levinson). In these instances, evaluation is seen as encouraging crucial dialogue among organizational stakeholders. When discussing evaluation with participants, two broad categories emerged: questioning for mission alignment and measurement of impact (quantitative and qualitative). In addition to diving into these categories, I discuss philosophical perspectives on measurement that bring key practices into debate.

#### **Questioning**

Why is 'traditional' evaluation so widely researched yet still perplexing for a wide range of organizations? Emerson explores this question and concludes that because many actors in the social sector are not fluent in terms of numeracy, efforts to create quantitative measurement have been "challenged as inappropriate, inaccurate, and invalid," (2003). Notwithstanding existing challenges from the social sector, impact measurement can be exceedingly difficult. While some fields lend themselves to more straightforward measurement (i.e. programs that find jobs for the homeless), others find it more difficult to do so (i.e. hospices). "Although hospice care often ends in death, no one will advocate that we get rid of hospice care because we can't demonstrate impact," argued Ted Levinson of RSF Social Finance. "On the other hand, although some things can be counted, not all can be counted affordably."

Organizations across the spectrum, from non-profits to established corporations, describe similar difficulties. Among the things they find difficulty quantifying are serendipity (Matocha; White), return on community (Markel; Tatz; White), changing minds (Agarwal; Fallender, Garlinghouse; Ruben), engagement (Agarwal; Blum; Emeott; Fallender; Garlinghouse; Lee; Rittenhouse), and action (Agarwal; Fallender; Garlinghouse; Lee). For example, LinkedIn does not measure what volunteers (talent) end up doing with opportunities presented to them on the site (Garlinghouse), and Vegas Tech Fund does not measure the results of entrepreneurs colliding and collaborating in the re-gentrifying downtown area of Las Vegas (White).

For these reasons, many organizations turn to the 'why' to benchmark actions and progress against social mission. "We [Vegas Tech Fund] focus on the why instead of execution," says partner Andy White. Similarly, Johanna Matocha of the Paradigm Project asserts, "We look to our mission to guide strategy in the absence of readily available or affordably measurable evaluation metrics." Like Matocha and White, Gail Gershon of GAP Inc. uses mission as a touch point to create logic models for social impact strategy.

Beyond guiding strategy, questioning for mission alignment was also seen to develop consensus in creating impact. At RSF, lenders are subject to an annual portfolio audit, mainly consisting of questions to encourage dialogue. "A number of borrowers have never really thought of social impact the way we thought of it," says Ted Levinson of RSF. Additionally, realized impact of lenders was observed to suffer when key decision makers disagreed over what kind of impact

they were targeting (ibid.). The portfolio audit, RSF claims, has been tremendously helpful for these lenders (Levinson; Mayfield). Yet most researchers and organizations do not publish such questionnaires or interview guides, leaving organizations uncertain about what questions are most crucial to answer or attempt. “Having questions like these available would be really valuable for the field,” says Levinson.

## **Measurement**

For some organizations, quantitative measurement is possible and efficient. For others, certain qualitative indicators form good proxies for impact.

For example, NPO Friends of the Children (FOTC) has benefited from an ROI study demonstrating that the payoff of investing in at-risk youth is seven times the cost (Sorenson). Its president claims that the study appeals to all, and has been crucial to the success of the organization’s development efforts (ibid.). RSF borrower and beverage producer Guayaki uses a simpler financial metric – the amount spent buying ingredients from sustainable farms – as an indicator of impact (Levinson).

The GAP assesses its youth engagement program by measuring the percent of students who have been offered full time jobs, now at eighty-six percent (Gershon). The organization, along with an increasing number of others, now turns to qualitative measures as well. Anecdotally, some of the GAP’s best employees have come from such programs (ibid.). NPO Education through Music (now ZSharp) grew to measure the success of its Bay Area in-school music programs not only through attendance and test scores pertaining to literacy, but also through excellence in performance during winter and spring concerts (Tatz).

No matter the mix of quantitative and qualitative measurement, practitioners urge organizations to not double-count impact or take too much credit (Levinson; Mayfield; Rittenhouse). “If every foundation counts all their beneficiary’s impact as their own, they’re double counting,” explains Lending Associate Reed Mayfield. Applying this logic, RSF does not consider borrower impact as necessarily RSF impact. Sustainability experts at DuPont echo the same message. “In no area are solutions only linked to DuPont’s work – they are the result of multiple actors coming together,” said Sustainable Development Director Dawn Rittenhouse.

## **Philosophical Perspectives**

A recurring theme voiced by social impact practitioners in the sample is that they seek to: 1) direct efforts to the most important objectives, and 2) utilize resources as effectively as possible while doing so (Matocha; Montani; Ruben; White). These two points all but mirror the strategy of the ‘effective altruism’ movement, founded by Princeton ethics professor and utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer (Brest). The movement stresses providing basic needs for the world’s poorest and prizes achieving effectiveness in doing so as a resounding success (ibid.). The theory begs two pivotal questions central to organizing for social impact: *what is the most important objective*, and, *what constitutes an effective effort to achieve the objective?*

The first question involves unpacking the social mission of the organization. The goal must be discovered to create a target for measurement. For traditional nonprofits, this step is simple since their social mission is their only mission (Alter 2007) notwithstanding mission drift that can be common in such organizations. For other entities, creating a social mission can be more open ended. Declared social missions can transform, creating new targets for measurement. Regardless

of an organization's profit structure, it can focus its prosocial efforts towards what Deborah Small and her colleagues call identifiable targets, or towards statistical targets (2007). Identifiable targets (i.e. Make A Wish's recipient Bat Kid) make salient a particular reference group, stimulating a powerful emotional response (Singer). In the absence of identifiable targets in their ranks, statistical targets (i.e. victims of malaria or fistulas) represent a large number of people with whom we cannot identify (ibid.). The problem with this – the identifiable victim effect – is that emotions make the plight of an identifiable individual more salient to us than that of a large number of people we cannot identify (Small et al. 2007). The identifiable victim effect partially explains why less than 10% of health research is spent on combatting conditions that account for 90% of disease worldwide (Singer). When organizing for prosocial good and deciding objectives, practitioners should be cognizant of this bias and ask whether objectives are pursued because of supporting statistics or because of the emotional pull of identification. *Is the most important initiative something statistical or something that excites?* To gather responses, I designed the first question in **Table 3**. The anecdotes I received tentatively confirm that it can be both (Gershon; Lee; Montani; Tatz).

The second question asked by the effective altruism movement lends itself to an equal amount of subjectivity. The movement's proponents argue that cost-benefit analysis should be applied to every dollar of charitable giving (Brest). In stages two and three of the interviews, the majority of participants challenged this logic. As previously mentioned, many are unwilling to pay for that overhead or view it as un-strategic. This recommendation assumes that social impact is achieved through donating money to nonprofit organizations, an action that practitioners representing for-profit and hybrid entities appear to be moving away from as they increasingly engage in asset priming, a form of internal scaling. Furthermore, it is unclear how to compare statistical and non-statistical measurements in most analyses of effectiveness. For example, is philanthropy for the arts and culture bad because its effects are difficult to quantify? "Philanthropy for the arts or for cultural activities is, in a world like this one, morally dubious," Professor Singer declares (Garner). Putting this debate aside, there is an entirely different way to gauge effectiveness. Following the recommendations general surgeon Atul Gawande sets forth in "Better: A Surgeon's Note on Performance," social impact practitioners can look at competing firms to understand their relative performance (2007). Benchmarking against organizations with different social missions, though, presents new and unanswered challenges.

## **B. Internal Scaling**

Evaluative questioning and measurement make possible a level of analysis necessary to guide internal scaling efforts – those that focus the organization's attention inwards when planning for social impact. The data collection revealed three distinct efforts that are made internally when organizing for prosocial good: mission framing, organization-specific asset priming, and internalization of stakeholder-centered decision making processes. These practices enable organizations to refocus and improve strategy by specifying and targeting their prosocial intentions, preparing and mobilizing valuable resources, and capitalizing on knowledge equity in the periphery.

### **Mission Framing**

An organization's mission statement serves as both a critical starting point for almost every strategic initiative (Bart et al. 2001) and as a long-term objective, the achievement of which is the *raison d'être* of the organization (McDonald 2007). Mission-driven organizations are infused with social value (Perry & Hondeghe 2008), and are well positioned to motivate organizational

members towards common organizations goals (Bart et al. 2001). This is particularly true for employees with high levels of prosocial motivation, who value benefiting others and look for opportunities to make a difference (Grant & Sumanth 2009). When the prosocial motivation of these employees is tapped, it can unlock greater persistence, performance, and productivity (Grant 2008; Ernst & Valvanne 2012).

For mission statements to make a positive contribution to overall performance, managers must structure them in a way that strengthens employees' perceptions of task significance – beliefs that their jobs have a positive impact on others (Grant & Sumanth 2009; Hackman & Oldham 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer 1978). When framed correctly, organizational missions can increase employee commitment (Bart et al. 2001), and the firm's capacity for innovation (McDonald 2007).

Of the organizations sampled in this study, the majority mentioned mission-framing activities as cornerstones of organizing efforts for social impact. Some feared the relevance of their identity would diminish without implementation of meaningful communication with stakeholders (Topalian 2003). Social impact and sustainability experts, like Rittenhouse at DuPont ask, "Will people care that the company is around in 200 years?" Communications like these do shape mission framing, especially in DuPont's case. The corporation has shifted its social mission to address how to feed 9 billion people by 2050, reduce dependence on fossil fuels, and protect people and the environment. The intensity of DuPont's social mission has enabled it to be flexible and shift its business strategy as well. "We don't think we have to stay with specific products because we invented them," said Rittenhouse (ibid.).

Although some organizations choose to use mission-framing to part with the past, others use history and brand identity to strengthen the resolve of their social impact efforts. Sustainability and social innovation Director Caroline Barlerin rolled back Hewlett Packard's history to unearth a problem solving culture deeply imbedded in the company. This identity made growing a culture of volunteerism within the company easy. Employees were already seen as addressing social issues, and through them, becoming more entrepreneurial and creating future business opportunities (Barlerin). HP is scaling initiatives that allow employees to use their skills to make a positive impact in the world in addition to their work in the company. Barlerin awaits a day when employees come to work at HP specifically to do so and the creation of an ecosystem where, "if you're not doing it, you're left out." Similarly, MTV strengthened its social impact efforts by looking to the past. "Prosocial has been part of MTV since the beginning: we were the first to talk openly about AIDS and LGBT issues, we were the first to have openly gay TV characters," says its Vice President of Public Affairs Noopur Agarwal. Having an activist leader – Stephen Friedman – at its helm, MTV has gone on to make prosocial initiatives central to the company and to employees' identities. "Everyone at MTV works on prosocial," said Agarwal.

The common knowledge in business used to be that to get people excited about a mission that may not be personally fulfilling to them, you pay them (Levinson). It now seems that social missions, framed in a way that makes them easily understood and shared, make for happier employees who are more focused, work for less money, and are more likely to succeed (ibid.)

### **Asset Priming**

Beyond organization specific mission framing, organizations are engaging in asset priming as a vehicle for social impact. This trend is particularly true for organizations whose greatest assets lie in human capital. Practitioners at HP and GAP Inc. stress that their companies represent a lot more than just cash (Barlerin; Gershon). For HP, employees are considered an asset. They are

primed to create impact through pro-bono volunteering programs, where employees are encouraged to give time, give skills, and acquire new ones. “Cleaning beaches and painting fences are good for team building, but we are more interested in creating virtuous cycles,” says Barlerin, who oversees many of the programs. The company has encouraged a ‘flywheel’ approach to impact: NPO partners get more access to the skills they need but cannot afford, and employees use skill muscles to develop craft and pride in their work (Barlerin). Following a similar logic, GAP Inc. is increasingly tapping into its employees to unlock the company’s potential for impact. The company’s ‘This Way Ahead’ program utilizes company employees as mentors to provide job readiness skills to underserved youth over the age of 16 (Gershon).

Beyond human capital, some organizations choose to leverage their core product when organizing for social impact. Meg Garlinghouse, Head of LinkedIn for Good, explains how the tech company simply added a ‘volunteer causes’ section to its profiles to allow users to display social impact commitments that were not on their online resumes. Though the field has only been on profiles for just over a year, over 1 million users have opted to use it. This seemingly small change has been a huge signal to the marketplace. Forty-two percent of hiring managers in the US now respond to surveys saying that they consider volunteer experience equivalent to former work experience (Garlinghouse).

### **Stakeholder-Centered Decision Making**

In addition to organization specific mission framing and asset priming, numerous participating organizations engaged in internal scaling of social impact efforts by internalizing stakeholder-centered decision making processes. The clearest example among this cohort is Blue State Coffee, created by founder Drew Ruben “by and for communities.” The original genesis of the organization was political. The founder and his father were looking to make political participation accessible and part of everyday life after the 2004 presidential election. More important that this, the founders stressed giving customers the ability to choose how Blue State distributed the percentage revenue it donated. Ruben quickly learned that customers cared more about local non-profit organizations than they did national political organizations. His business embraced this change by shifting their revenue-sharing focus towards NPOs. Since then, Blue State has donated over \$400,000 to 150 local non-profits.

MTV has internalized a similar customer focus when organizing for social impact. “Issues we take on always evolve based on where our audience is,” (Agarwal). When social issues emerge naturally, a team is called in to see how they can responsibly manage those situations, present issues in a responsible manner, and use them as teaching moments for viewers. For example, the team responded to audience concern about online relationships by launching a 2009 campaign about ways relationships are played out online (ibid.). Through initiatives like the aforementioned, the organization strives to bring awareness of issues affecting its viewers to a larger audience. “We try to keep our fingers on the pulse of culture, talk about what’s happening immediately, and work with expert partners to create action steps to bring these issues to even greater attention. Throughout the process, our north star is the consumer.”

### **C. External Scaling**

Participating practitioners describe increasingly looking beyond the confines of their organizations when planning for prosocial good. This process is largely marked by interactions with other organizations or smaller actors, in which externally facing organizations can assume leadership and mentor positions while leveraging and providing benefits through partnerships.

While these practices can be more ambiguous and iterative than internal ones, external scaling and interaction can provide opportunities for impact that is more expansive, inclusive, and innovative than can be accomplished by any single actor independently.

### **Movement Leadership**

Of the organizations sampled in this study, many have chosen to adopt social missions that extend beyond the confines of their organizations. In aspiring to trigger movements, they hope that collective impact will be greater than that of one single firm. These movements range from encouraging political participation (Ruben), to transforming the way the world works with money (Levinson), and include creating community in re-gentrifying areas (Markel), spreading social benefits through accessible and nutritious food (Lee), and giving tools to encourage youth activism (Agarwal).

The logic behind movement leadership is twofold. First, many organizations understand that they and their affiliates cannot identify, target, and solve complex social problems alone (Barlerin; Levinson; Markel; Rittenhouse; Sorensen). The movement approach, for example, is more effective because of capital constraints placed on individual actors (Markel). Second, movement leadership allows actors to put the problem in the middle instead of the company. Thus, the focus shifts to finding and supporting models that work, whether the desired impact is achieved via replication or the intended initiatives (Levinson, Sorensen). Indeed, leaders at RSF and FOTC specifically described how their companies strive for impact by investing in models targeting large problems, whether the solutions come from their actions or from replication. Responding to the possibility that their company's impact is achieved through replication, RSF Director Ted Levinson comments, "that's cool with us."

### **Partnership**

Movement triggering or not, utilizing partners as part of organizing strategies for social impact is a commonplace and widely accepted practice. Pat Montani, founder at NPO Bicycles for Humanity, likens the logic behind this to the spider and starfish story. "When you cut the head off a spider, it dies, but if you cut the tentacles off of a starfish, it grows," said Montani. Detailing the depth and breadth of partnerships B4H has accumulated, he claims, "We are the classic starfish."

External scaling through partnership is an interactive process: participating organizations treat partners as proxies for impact and themselves contribute to partnerships to expand that impact. For example, Habitat for Humanity Portland's Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (NRI) intentionally leverages existing local organizations when working to improve quality of life in target areas (Norby). In the Bay Area, Education through Music leverages the existing educational infrastructure by placing music programs in public schools and designing programming to reinforce what students are learning in other classes (Tatz).

Leaders at FOTC and HP acknowledged the importance of actively contributing to partnerships, even selflessly. FOTC shared its model with an affiliate in the UK to allow it to provide similar services (Sorensen). Additionally, the organization often takes advantage of the close relationship it incubates with at risk youth to connect them to ancillary services (ibid.). Caroline Barlerin of HP likens this behavior to a shift from traditional philanthropy to a model where partners sit and address problems together instead of alone. "If we're trying to address critical world social challenges, companies have a responsibility to be at the table. Not just for a moral imperative, but also for a business imperative," said Barlerin.

## VI. Conclusions and Future Research

The goal of this study is not to simply represent commonly experienced for- or non-profit organization experiences, but rather to capture the broad array of patterns that emerge within and between organizations concerned with social impact. As such, my focus was to develop ideas, concepts, and models rather than portray specific phenomenon in broadly generalizable terms. To realize this motivation and answer the research questions *how are organizations structured to create social good*, and *how can the odds of social impact be improved*, I conducted a qualitative explorative study. The upside of conducting qualitative studies is that they provide conceptual categories and patterns for quantitative researchers to test and explore further (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The accounts and stories described provide vivid, meaningful pictures that appeal to policymakers and practitioners while giving researchers the flexibility to conduct further cross-sectional analytical studies. As such, I aimed to raise some interesting issues about the composite picture presented by participating organizations and pave the way for further insights to be generated on how organizations can create prosocial good. Through conducting a literature review and holding nineteen qualitative interviews with leaders in the field, I fashioned a discussion on impact evaluation along with two broad categories that detail how organizations, from non-profits to corporations practicing CSR, strive to generate prosocial good.

### Limitations

#### *Sampling*

Taken as a whole, this study and the field it focuses on are not without limitations. The sample focused on financially solvent and operating organizations that have experienced some degree of success in their social impact efforts. As Dacin and colleagues assert, focusing on ‘survivors’ can bias our understanding (2010). Additionally, with the exception of RSF, I only solicited data from one representative of each target organization. Just as two students sitting in a lecture can have different notes on the presentation given, two members of the same organization can hold different perspectives, thought processes, and insights regarding social impact efforts. Because much of the sampling was concentrated on the east and west coasts with closely connected practitioners, the results may over represent logic models present in one pool. As qualitative researchers, my aim was to reach theoretical saturation, but one always wonders how a larger sample would affect the data.

In addition to limitations regarding the organizations constructing the sample, there were limitations arising from whom I ended up interviewing and how the interviews were conducted. First, it was difficult to ensure that I chose the right participants in target organizations. Just because an individual was perceived to have the highest level of expertise in the topic of the study does not mean that they were open to questioning, discussion, and sharing ideas. In fact, I found that having the wrong initial touch points within organizations closed off access to other individuals within those organizations who could have provided additional insights. On the flip side, some participants in positions farther away from the work the study focused on infused novelty and added new and unexpected perspectives to the mix. In all, though the variety of positions in the sample can be seen as a detriment, I view it as an asset. I do, however, lament that difficulties precluded me from conducting all the interviews on site and in person – the format I found to yield the greatest amount of rapport building and the most pivotal insights. I partially attribute this shortcoming to scheduling difficulties, but wonder if practitioners in the field are discounting the merits of academic research in their discipline. While I understand that studies like ours shamelessly contribute to a growing fruit salad of social impact verbiage and

terminology, I firmly believe that thoughtful academic research holds the power to yield valuable contributions to knowledge and practice.

### *Analysis*

The selection of grounded theory methodology to guide data analysis made qualitative interviewing a delicate process. Because data collection and data analysis often intertwine during the interview process, deviations from the interview guide were sometimes made on the fly to pursue insights and to strengthen the emerging theory. While this process was exciting, it was challenging to work within the time constraint of interviews to both employ good interviewing skills (allowing participants ample time to respond to questions and pose challenges), and actively work to pursue new insights during my time with participants. More time, less questions, or a combination of the two could have given participants more room to either share more or share more critically.

After interviews were completed, I had to delicately balance writing research with insights from eighteen organizations with the constraints of creating theory that is easy to interpret and follow. I achieved this balance by delimiting and streamlining the theory. I do feel, however, that the nature of the study precluded me from sharing anything about the subject organizations that was not exemplary. I viewed attempts to secure assurances to hide imperfection as distasteful, especially since my aim was not to make endorsements or complaints about organizations or individuals. Notwithstanding these limitations, I hope the research elucidated the fruitful pathways used by organizations to create social value.

### **Reflections**

#### *On being a qualitative researcher.*

Beyond its research advantages, qualitative research can be an exciting and adventurous pursuit. For the intellectually curious, it is an excellent opportunity to build knowledge and expand skill sets in diverse disciplines. These advantages, though, are accompanied by struggle. First, emerging theory is difficult to explain to potential subject participants, as research questions often refocus or pivot during constant comparison and analysis. While open-ended questions are valuable, too much vagueness can render subjects incapable of providing relevant insights. Additionally, the ambiguous and tentative nature of emerging theory can make established experts nervous and closed towards sharing their knowledge and experiences. I experienced this firsthand, as a senior partner in the evaluation practice of a social impact consultancy rejected questions and abstained from providing knowledge about the research topic. While this experience was not the norm, it prompted me to think deeply about what could have been done to generate an atmosphere where the individual could have unpacked any previous objections and shared knowledge with an open mind.

This experience and others taught me that a large part of successful qualitative research rests in experienced understanding of interpersonal dynamics. Executing the study required exerting influence and establishing credibility to gain access to subject participants. It involved harnessing the humility to acknowledge being young and a student while challenging participants who were older and more experienced to overcome their reservations. And it involved practicing the openness to study and understand the provocative and seemingly crazy (Singer) and unpack their ideas to strengthen emerging theory.



Being a qualitative researcher requires developing a high tolerance for change and uncertainty. For example, grounded theory methodology leaves researchers replete of theory until theoretical saturation is reached. Just like the study participants, I wanted to continuously do better – a process that involved overcoming my insecurities and changing my norms. When designing every step of the study, I asked myself *why, why, why* until I linked my actions to the mission of the study. Participants went through a similar process when linking organizing for prosocial good to their organizations' terminal values. Both these actions required patience but also a willingness and flexibility to step in and remedy ineffectiveness and inefficiency.

While conducting the study, I identified two potential pitfalls that apply to both qualitative research and social impact; being agreeable and being impersonal. Being agreeable, even 'nice,' does not guarantee success in either discipline. Fear of asking difficult questions, raising minority opinions, and voicing informed concern create complacency – not impact. Next, the quest to infuse analytic strategy in these fields must not come at the expense of the identifiable quality that lies at the heart of both of them. Improved analysis should continue to be used to up level standards and unlock new possibilities, but practitioners need to remain cognizant of the power of people and storytelling to bring prosocial initiatives and qualitative research to life.

*On simplicity and the unexpected.*

Some ask me, *when researching models for social impact, did you come across anything you did not expect?* Yes, I did.

I came across a field that is both speeding forward to advance and innovate, and turning on the brakes to embrace the simplicity of doing 'good.' The simplest answers to my questions often shocked me the most, particularly the 'no's'. No's challenge assumptions. Challenging assumptions is both riveting and terrifying for researchers. Beyond the select 'no's,' participants mentioned the social benefits of just being businesses, having accessible products, and charging sustainable prices. They championed paying people fairly, staying local, giving back, making long-term choices, and being sustainable. These seem like a pretty standard lot, but as early mission driven organizations and new pioneers race to adopt complex and customized solutions, the majority of small or traditional enterprise will transition to adopt these tried and true practices.

Beyond finding simplicity, I found the unexpected in places I never thought. The first thing that struck me was some organizations' willingness to change direction completely, quickly, and decisively. At times, this is a business necessity, but not one that most entities readily embrace. As social impact graduates its infancy, I believe that firms willing to evaluate and change directions will be well positioned to successfully implement and scale prosocial initiatives. I also believe that consumers will respond favorably to the effort, persistence, and sincerity of practitioners guiding these changes.

I was also struck by organizations' willingness to stay their course and pursue mastery there in the face of pressure that push every socially driven organization to do more. Doing more, when imprudent, does not generate more impact.

Lastly, It was a pleasant surprise to see women equally represented at high levels of prosocial programs at leading organizations. Just in the time of this study, several have either just assumed director level positions in social innovation or are in the process of doing so. Seeing leaders with prosocial experience rise to the helm like Stephen Friedman did at MTV is inspiring. They are the ones who can push organizations to do more than increase shareholder value and answer

complacently to donors. Social impact is a field that allows women to shine and make critical contributions to the governance of our companies and the world. I applaud their success.

*On building understanding of social impact.*

Of the tools to organize for shared value, those under internal scaling are recalled most easily. But efforts to create positive feedback loops between business and society need not stave resources from more outwardly facing programs. As the study evidences, before organizations gain tenure employing tools to enact shared value, they are moving beyond it. They understand that initiatives like combatting AIDS, reacting to natural disasters, creating healthcare infrastructures in developing nations are so great that they necessitate more than just internal changes and optimization.

To witness the tremendous pace of advancement and thought in the field is inspiring, but that does not mean that there is not room for improvement. Social impact practitioners face new challenges every day. Among them, increasing transparency, interpreting mission communications, and boiling down social impact efforts so stakeholders can identify and support them. At the same time, practitioners are cautious to focus on sustainability. *Are recipients of impact capacity building? Or, are efforts creating dependence?*

Next come the effective altruists, slightly more radical and provocative than the rest of the social impact bunch. But they raise an interesting question, *are we being effective?* Without dissenters like these, the field would not have been pushed to make such great strides in evaluation. The evaluation discussion says two things about the field. First, practitioners should measure *something*. Second, people who say things that are radical or different should not immediately be dismissed. That is to say, alignment of stakeholders should not go to the length of silencing dissent.

Finally, social impact is a bottom-up, top-down, and iterative process. Like in any kind of innovation, there should be a process of plan-do-check adjust. Additionally, change can be enacted at different levels of the organization, and involve different players within and outside. Social impact is not just for managers.

## **Future Research**

One of the key issues I tried to grasp in this study is how decisions are guided. The risk in this is that it shifted questioning and discussion to the conceptual. It proved to be much easier to ask about specific initiatives than to ask participants to recall thought processes and logic models they used to organize for prosocial good. However, conceptual discussions went further to establish codes and categories of theory that later guided the research.

To further explore this topic, I suggest two follow up studies. The first would assess how data analytics is used to organize for social impact. I suggest a heavier focus on select organizations and initiatives to form case studies, as this is still an emerging field. I am particularly interested in what analytics are designed to capture and how they are employed and affect subsequent decision-making. The second study would encompass analytics and impact measurement and ask if and how measurement prompts pivots in social impact initiatives. Specifically, *will analytics and measurement change the target of social innovation?* The question of whether evaluation has transformational value by guiding organizations to pivot mission or prosocial initiatives was not attempted in this study, but is intriguing nonetheless.

If the current study were continued, I would add additional questions to capture experimentation, failure, and innovation in social impact. I would also be curious to apply the interview guide questions to contrasting disciplines. It is possible that adding an additional target in a cross-disciplinary study would elucidate some of the findings by providing contrasting insights, conceptual categories, and questions.

## VII. Appendix

### A. Full Listing of Participant Organizations and Interviewees

**Table 1**                      **Participating Organizations, by Type and Industry**

Name	Type	Industry
Bicycles for Humanity (B4H)	NPO	Mobility, Healthcare
Education Through Music (ETM)	NPO	Education
Friends of the Children (FOTC)	NPO	Education
Habitat for Humanity (PDX)	NPO	Housing
Downtown Project	SI	Urban Development
Paradigm Project	SI	Sustainable Goods
United By Blue (UBB)	SI	Apparel
Blue State Coffee (BSC)	SRB	Food & Beverage
Chobani	SRB	Food & Beverage
Kiva	SRB	Microfinance
RSF Social Finance	SRB	Financial Services
Vagas Tech Fund (VTF)	SRB	Venture Capital
DuPont	CSR	Chemicals
GAP Inc.	CSR	Apparel
Hewlett Packard (HP)	CSR	Technology
Intel	CSR	Technology
LinkedIn	CSR	Technology
MTV Viacom	CSR	Media

*Note:* NPO, non profit organization; SI, social enterprise; SRB, socially responsible business; CSR, corporation practicing CSR

**Table 2**                      **Participating Interviewees, by Position and Organization**

Name	Position	Organization
Pat Montani	Founder	Bicycles for Humanity (B4H)
Dylan Tatz	Executive Director	Education Through Music (ETM)
Terri Sorensen	President	Friends of the Children (FOTC)
Danell Norby	Coordinator, Neighborhood Revitalization	Habitat for Humanity (PDX)
Jeanne Markel	Director, Culture	Downtown Project
Johanna Matocha	Director, Carbon & Impact Systems Development	Paradigm Project
Allison Blum	Director, Marketing	United By Blue (UBB)
Drew Ruben	Former CEO	Blue State Coffee (BSC)
Sujean Lee	Vice President, Philanthropy	Chobani
Claudine Emeott	Portfolio Manager, Strategic Initiatives	Kiva
Ted Levinson	Director, Lending	RSF Social Finance
Reed Mayfield	Associate, Lending	RSF Social Finance
Andy White	Partner	Vegas Tech Fund (VTF)
Dawn Rittenhouse	Director, Sustainable Development	DuPont
Gail Gershon	Executive Director, Community Leadership	GAP Inc.
Caroline Barlerin	Director, Sustainability & Social Innovation	Hewlett Packard (HP)
Suzanne Fallender	Director, Global Girls & Women Initiative	Intel
Meg Garlinghouse	Head, LinkedIn for Good	LinkedIn
Noopur Agarwal	Vice President, Public Affairs	MTV

## Appendix B. Stages of Interview Protocol

**Table 3** Stages of Interview Protocol

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*Stage 1: Social Mission*

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- Tell me a story or anecdote that brings your organization's social purpose to life
  - What is your organization's social mission, vision, and/or theory of change?
    - How did you arrive at this approach?
    - What is most unique/controversial about it? How is it different from other models?
    - Were other alternatives or options considered when making this decision?
  - How is social impact defined by your organization?
    - What does this mean for your organization?
  - Have you come across any junctures that influenced how your organization's social mission is directed?
    - Have these caused a pivot in your thinking or planning process?
- 

*Stage 2: Organizing & Framing Efforts*

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- How are opportunities to engage in social impact recognized?
    - Once an opportunity has been recognized, what happens then?
  - How are social outcomes defined? What kinds of metrics guide your decision-making?
  - What is the process for reviewing social impact performance?
- 

*Stage 3: Targets, Continuity & Scaling*

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- Is there any kind of continual development / scaling of prosocial ventures at your organization?
    - What does this look like?
    - How do you see this taking place?
  - What kind of impact are you targeting?
  - Do social programs transform larger systems in which they are embedded?
  - Are there elements of continuity planning / scaling that focus on learning, improving, or modifying organizational design for impact?
- 

*Debrief*

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- Is there anyone in the space that you follow, learn from, or are intrigued by? Why?
  - Is there anything I have not asked that you would like to bring up?
-

## **Appendix C: Selected Quotations from Interview Transcriptions**

### **Evaluation**

*“Not everything that matters can be counted, and not everything that can be counted matters.”*  
Ted Levinson, RSF (quoting Albert Einstein)

*“We raise questions for their transformational value. Perhaps the greatest benefit of our social impact assessment is the educational process with our borrowers regarding the value of thinking about and becoming intentional about social impact as part of their business operations.”*  
Reed Mayfield, RSF

*“Reasons for action/interaction do not necessarily dictate outcomes.”*  
Andy White, VTF

*“It is often difficult to quantify collision of people and ideas, ROC [return on community], and serendipity.”*  
Andy White, VTF

*“There are things that are harder to measure; changing minds, tracking engagement and action.”*  
Suzanne Fallender, Intel

### **Internal Scaling – Organization Specific Mission Framing**

*“Mission is where we want to go: it indicates intention. The values and principles are how we’re going to get there. All evaluation is meaningless unless it is wrapped around the mission.”*  
Ted Levinson, RSF

*“At Chobani, we focus on the following areas: What do we think we stand for? What do we want to stand for? What are the greatest strengths we can leverage? What are the wide spaces where we can see tangible results? What are other people doing that resonates and inspires us? We are trying to boil these down for employees and customers. There is a beauty in saying this in one sentence. Complex companies cannot always do this.”*  
Sujean Lee, Chobani

*“Organizations are disadvantaged when they cannot articulate their social mission.”*  
Claudine Emeott, Kiva

### **Internal Scaling – Asset Priming**

*“We take our employees and the portfolio of goods and services HP has to offer and ask: How do we address social issues but also help the company?”*  
Caroline Barlerin, HP

*“We represent more than just cash. Gap Inc. has lots of other resources, including the talent of 135,000 employees around the world. Their combined impact outweighs that of any grant.”*  
Gail Gershon, GAP Inc.

## **Internal Scaling – Internalization of Stakeholder-Centered Decision Making Processes**

*“It is an honor to be part of an organization where when pivots left or right are made, each and every employee is a driver of which direction the company takes.”*

Jeanne Markel, Downtown Project

*“We are by and for communities. We want to reflect customers in our planning.”*

Drew Ruben, BSC

*“... Our north star is the consumer. Every decision at every step of the process is driven about them.”*

Noopur Agarwal, MTV

*“We put the problem in the middle instead of the company.”*

Caroline Barlerin, HP

## **External Scaling – Movement Leadership**

*“Our mission is to transform the way the world works with money.”*

Ted Levinson, RSF

*“Our capital investment is a small part of what we do. \$350 million isn’t even enough to build [the] El Cortez [casino]. Our movement approach is effective because of capital constraints.”*

Jeanne Markel, Downtown Project

*“Our company wants to start a dialogue about issues that require more attention. For example, what does it mean to be or support a US business? How do we inspire entrepreneurs and small businesses to pursue craftsmanship in the US?”*

SuJean Lee, Chobani

*“Part of our external piece is looking at how to uplevel standards for an entire industry instead of just our company.”*

Suzanne Fallender, Intel

*“The last thing we get excited about is not what we can do at GAP Inc. but how we can impact others as well. This is where the next opportunity is: collaborating with and influencing other companies.”*

Gail Gershon, GAP Inc.

## **External Scaling – Leveraging Partners**

*“Our starting premise is: how do we get people to help other people?”*

Pat Montani, B4H

*“Each of our programs is integrated into an existing school. We reinforce and build off of what students learn in class.”*

Dylan Tatz, ETM



*“Our long term vision does not necessarily have to be fulfilled by our organization. We understand the power of our partners to fulfill our vision, and we share our strategies when we find that they work.”*

Terri Sorensen, FOTC

*“We see ourselves as poised to connect our children to other services.”*

Terri Sorensen, FOTC

### **External Scaling – Acting as Partners**

*“Of the largest 100 economies in the world, 51 are companies. If we’re trying to address critical world social challenges, companies have a responsibility to be at the table. Not just for a moral imperative, but also for a business imperative.”*

Caroline Barlerin, HP

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